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PENNE LAVERY OF ILWU LOCAL 13 AND 63, PCPA

INTERVIEWEE: PENNE LAVERY

INTERVIEWERS: HARVEY SCHWARTZ

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[00:00:00] **PENNE LAVERY:** Hi, my name is Penne Lavery. My birthday is 01/02/1948. I was born in a very small town called Fillmore, Utah. I have been in International Longshore and Warehouse Union [ILWU] Local 63, Local 13, and the clerical division of Local 63. I am retired now, and with Southern California, the pensioners [of ILWU Local] .

[00:00:50] **HARVEY SCHWARTZ:** Do you hold office with the pensioners?

[00:00:51] **PENNE:** Yes, I do, I am the president and have been for three years [nods] .

[00:00:58] **HARVEY:** Tell me a little bit about your background and—you were born in a rural area? How did you ever get to California?

[00:01:05] **PENNE:** My dad was in the Navy and he was a pilot—well he was in the Air Force in the Second World War and after the war he came here, because he had been here, I assume, and we stayed.

My dad was a mechanic and he managed to trade things for his work and one of the things he traded was a house in Long Beach [California] , so we lived there [nods, laughs] .

[00:01:33] **HARVEY:** What was it like growing up in Long Beach?

[00:01:35] **PENNE:** I had a very charmed childhood, absolutely blessed. We lived in a house with other people who were just like us economically and educationally, different in race and country of origin, but all of the parents were our parents [nodding] and they let us know that we were responsible to all of them [nodding] .

[00:02:04] **HARVEY:** Did you go to school in Long Beach?

[00:02:06] **PENNE:** I did, I went to Patrick Henry Elementary School, Marshall Junior High, Millikan High School, then Long Beach City College, and then Irvine for a teaching credential.

[00:02:18] **HARVEY:** Had your family had any union involvement?

[00:02:25] **PENNE:** My grandfathers did, they were very strong Teamsters [union] and it was an acceptable profession in my family for the males to drive truck. I was 16 years old before I realized that P-I-E spelled pie [nodding] . My parents, no, but my grandparents [were] —and one of my grandmothers was a nurse, and she was in a union.

[00:02:54] **HARVEY:** Did you work as a teacher?

[00:02:56] **PENNE:** I did work as a teacher, a Montessori teacher, my class was two to four year olds [nods] .

[00:03:03] **HARVEY:** How did you get into the ILWU?

[00:03:07] **PENNE:** My husband had work for—he had been down on the waterfront forever, in clerical jobs, and he had put in for longshoreman several times and when they were giving out applications again, he dragged me down there and made me fill out an application [nodding] .

As a teacher, I still qualified for food stamps, so [gestures] he said, “If you’re going back to work—after our youngest child was born—you’re going where there is some money.” He took me down there, I filled out an application, and it was a couple of years before they called me. [Shrugs] That was it—

[00:03:53] **HARVEY:** What was his name?

[00:03:54] **PENNE:** Jim Lavery.

[00:03:57] **HARVEY:** When did they call you?

[00:03:59] **PENNE:** About two years after that.

[00:04:01] **HARVEY:** Do you remember approximately when that was?

[00:04:03] **PENNE:** It was October, September, or November, something like that.

[00:04:10] **HARVEY:** And what did they call you for?

[00:04:11] **PENNE:** An interview. We had to go through an interview and then a physical. I think in Southern California—there were women down there, there were a few. But in our group, they took in women and I think I was the first one to be interviewed [smiles and laughs] .

[00:04:28] **HARVEY:** What year was this again?

[00:04:30] **PENNE:** 81

[00:04:30] **HARVEY:** Were you in Local 13 or Local 63 at this time?

[00:04:37] **PENNE:** I was in 63 as a clerical worker [nods] , and I was the business agent for the clerical workers.

[00:04:45] **HARVEY:** How did you get to be that?

[00:04:46] **PENNE:** I got elected [smiles and nods] . The regional director down there was a very—was my mentor—and I had met Al Perisho and he taught me a lot, and they urged me to run, and my husband urged me to run, and I did, and I won [smiles] .

[00:05:06] **HARVEY:** What were you doing before you ran? In order to stand out in the organization?

[00:05:12] **PENNE:** I was always active. My parents sort of were happy to hear that I was in a union and was active in it, because I've been active in other things before and they said at least this one was legal [laughs] .

[00:05:24] **HARVEY:** What had you been active in before?

[00:05:28] **PENNE:** Well, we helped with clean-up of the birds in Santa Barbara after the oil spill—I'm trying to tell you the good stuff—and I had been travelling with groups of people. I had been a bartender, they didn't care for that [laughs and nods] . I can't remember—

[00:05:57] **HARVEY:** What were the illegal ones?

[00:05:58] **PENNE:** Well, actually the bartender was one of the illegal ones, because in California, women weren't allowed to tend bar and that was right after my 21st birthday. As soon as they changed the law this guy just took us and threw us behind the bar, we didn't know anything, and we did not join the union.

[00:06:22] **HARVEY:** The bartender's union?

[00:06:23] **PENNE:** Yes. Which is something that was always kind of [gestures] —I don't think we knew they existed.

[00:06:30] **HARVEY:** What kind of work did you do in 1981?

[00:06:37] **PENNE:** When I was clerical, I started in inbound documentation, which was preparing the customs manifests, making lists of containers that were to go to the rail, or to stay here, or [gestures] . But it was mostly customs and preparing the documents for customs, and then there was a copier machine and a mimeograph. We had a computer, but it was on the seventh floor of the building and—Jimmy Carter was president and he had

declared that you couldn't set the thermostats lower than a certain degree and our computer kept blowing up [laughs] because it was too hot on the seventh floor.

[00:07:30] **HARVEY:** Carter was president up to 1980, as I recall, then Ronald Reagan won.

[00:07:37] **PENNE:** Yes, I guess that's right.

[00:07:42] **HARVEY:** So were you there before 1981?

[00:07:50] **PENNE:** Yes, I started on the waterfront itself in '76—

[00:07:55] **HARVEY:** Doing what?

[00:07:57] **PENNE:** I was an inbound documentation clerk for the agency that handled Oriental Overseas Container Line [OOCL] —that was non-union for about six months and then we organized them [laughs] .

[00:08:14] **HARVEY:** Were you involved in that?

[00:08:14] **PENNE:** I was, but the company didn't know I was [shakes head] because I was still a probationary employee [smiles] . The east coast was on strike and so the ships were diverted here—to the West Coast—and the clericals, all of a sudden, had so much overtime. We had to prepare double the logs for customs and everything else that went along with it. I didn't know what I was doing so I had to call my husband to come help me [laughs] , and they also cut our pay 15%. Somebody—I will not tell you who it was—came to me and said, “You know people in the Union, call them,” and I did. It wasn't until after the election that anybody knew that I had done that. Then I was on the negotiating committee and the negotiator was Don Wright, the Regional Director, and he would say, “Is this what you meant Penne?” Because I researched a lot of contracts to find what I wanted in our contract [laughs] .

[00:09:42] **HARVEY:** That's great. Was this in '63?

[00:09:44] **PENNE:** Yes, I was a clerical worker in '63 [nods] .

[00:09:49] **HARVEY:** You mentioned a landmark here in 1981, what happened in 1981? Did something change?

[00:09:55] **PENNE:** I got through the interview process and got a letter from Local 13 that I had been accepted as an ID, so we were “B-Men,” and there was 500 of us and there was no work. It was tough. We were called “The Famine 500” [chuckles] .

[00:10:20] **HARVEY:** You were the “Famine 500” to differentiate you from the “Unemployed 500,” which preceded you a decade or two?

[00:10:30] **PENNE:** I don't know, I think so.

[00:10:35] **HARVEY:** You don't know those people?

[00:10:36] **PENNE:** I don't know those people.

[00:10:37] **HARVEY:** No problem. Tell me what it was like once you got work. You finally must have got some work.

[00:10:44] **PENNE:** The first night that I checked in, I got a three o'clock shift. We were sitting on top of the containers, me and my partner, and I don't even remember what we were supposed to be doing, but the sun was coming up and it was beautiful and I thought, Oh man, I can do this [laughs, gestures] . The next day I got bananas [laughs] , Oh man, I can't do this! [laughs, nods]

[00:11:12] **HARVEY:** Tell us about working with bananas, why was it unpleasant? What was bad about it?

[00:11:18] **PENNE:** I was smaller than I am now, and it was hot, they were heavy, we had on the protective clothes, but the sweat would go in your eyes and sting. We learned, we got sweat bands and stuff. I didn't have the stamina to throw bananas and it took me a good six months before I could do it well.

[00:11:49] **HARVEY:** Did you do bananas a lot?

[00:11:51] **PENNE:** We did them for two years [nods] . Every once and a while we'd get another job, but that was mostly what we got as IDs.

[00:12:03] **HARVEY:** There were rumors at times that there were bugs and things—

[00:12:06] **PENNE:** Oh yes [smiling and laughing] ! And spiders! The spiders and the rats and the snakes—there's nothing that smells as bad as a banana ship. Actually even hides do not bother me as much as a banana ship did [laughing, nodding] .

[00:12:24] **HARVEY:** Give us all you can in terms of detail working with that product.

[00:12:30] **PENNE:** [Sighs] Well, you would go—you had to work your way down and so you started out with a flat hatch [hand motions throughout descriptions] —although I did work stocks once, but only once, because my grandfather had told me stocks stories—

[00:12:46] **HARVEY:** What are stocks?

[00:12:47] **PENNE:** Stocks are the branches of bananas that the guys used to have to put on their shoulders, I only did that once. We normally had boxes of bananas and you had to—they called it digging—you had to dig down for the conveyor belt to go down. So the first day you start on the top deck and dig out the center and go down and when you got down to the very bottom—the ships did not have air, they didn't have lights, they certainly didn't have bathrooms—and that was it. All the first day you could be going like this [gesturing lifting from waist-level to above shoulder-level] and putting them kind of above your head because the conveyor belt couldn't come down flat on the bananas so you would have to throw them in the pocket.

[00:13:47] **HARVEY:** Were you working with men when you were doing this job, too?

[00:13:49] **PENNE:** Yes [nodding] , you know what [pained look] —I don't know if this is other women's experience or not, but the men broke into groups. My experience was that there were racial things involved with the guys. The white men hated us [shaking head] . They would do whatever they could to get rid of us [looking down] . The Mexican guys wanted to do the work for us [smiles, chuckles] , and the Black guys showed us how

to work [shrugs] . I don't know, that sounds so general, and it was—generalities are never any good—but there were only about 10% assholes, everybody else was cool [laughs] .

[00:14:53] **HARVEY:** Do you remember any specific examples of an interaction, let's say, with a white guy or Mexican guy or with a Black guy? Any stories you can give us? Examples?

[00:15:04] **PENNE:** [Grimaces] Uh, ok, I've got three: one white, one Mexican, and one Black. I don't want to say there weren't white men—there were a lot of people who helped us—but there was this one guy who really didn't like us at all. We were working bananas in the back end of the ship. He dropped a box on my arm, and I've always felt it was on purpose [pantomiming where box landed on arm] , and there was a Mexican guy we were working—they used to have these things call clamps on top of the containers and he wouldn't let me get near the edge, he did it for me. Then we were lashing one time, and my partner was Black and we were way behind and finally he said, "Hasn't anybody ever shown you how to do this?" And I said "No". He said "Why not?" And I said, "Well, they'd rather laugh at us." So he showed me how to do the lashing and we got caught up.

[00:16:15] **HARVEY:** Great illustrations.

[00:16:19] **PENNE:** There were others—there were white guys that were wonderful, absolutely wonderful. I've never met a group of people that I love as much as I do these guys.

[00:16:33] **HARVEY:** That's good. What was the best cargo you worked? Or most pleasant, if there was one?

[00:16:41] **PENNE:** Automobiles. Cars. Driving the autos off the ship was always fun. We drove a lot of cars off ships, so we got to test drive all of the new models and we loaded cars going—especially service men—to Hawaii, so we got to drive a lot of old cars, too. Autos, we were a group, we had a group that we called the "All My Autos" instead of "All My Children," we were a soap opera and we all had characters and we had one guy who played trivia on the buses on the way back to the ship. We were a close knit group because there wasn't very much work, and we shared—autos, I would say autos.

[00:17:39] **HARVEY:** Any other hard cargo or unpleasant cargo you can think of besides bananas?

[00:17:46] **PENNE:** Actually, once I got fit and was able to throw bananas, they were not bad at all. The drums of frozen orange juice I really disliked.

[00:18:00] **HARVEY:** Why?

[00:18:01] **PENNE:** It was cold, it was really, really cold and you were only allowed to work 40 minutes and then you had to come up on top. I had so many clothes on they started calling me "Bubba," because I was freezing. Then we spilled a barrel and having to shovel it up was just— [shaking head] it was bad [chuckles] , mainly because it was so cold.

[00:18:29] **HARVEY:** Did you ever work hides?

[00:18:31] **PENNE:** I did.

[00:18:33] **HARVEY:** Was it fun?

[00:18:33] **PENNE:** Well, no it wasn't fun [laughs] , but it wasn't unbearable.

[00:18:40] **HARVEY:** Really? Ok. Can you describe it?

[00:18:45] **PENNE:** Well it smelled and the maggots dripped [nods] , and if you were lucky it was cold so it kept the smell down a little bit.

[00:18:59] **HARVEY:** In Southern California though, it's sometimes not cold.

[00:19:01] **PENNE:** Yes, but we don't have "real weather."

[00:19:04] **HARVEY:** When did you get beyond being a casual?

[00:19:11] **PENNE:** I was never a casual. We didn't have casuals at that time, I was a "B Man." I got elevated about close to three years later, I think. I don't have my card with me, otherwise I'd show you, because it's got my dates on it.

[00:19:34] **HARVEY:** How about getting active in the union? Were you active in Local 13?

[00:19:38] **PENNE:** I was active in [Local] 63 as a clerical worker and I was on the district council and I was the business agent, and the district council was very active at that time. We went all over the place working against "right to work" and for political candidates and then when I got into [Local] 13, I just kind of went to work because it was as much as I could handle at that time. When I retired I said, One of the things I have to do is pay back and give back into the active side.

[00:20:18] **HARVEY:** So you were in 13, but at some point you went back over to 63?

[00:20:25] **PENNE:** Yes, I went back to 63, about—I don't know exactly what year it was. It was only about three, maybe four years before I retired, and I think I've been retired six or seven years.

[00:20:37] **HARVEY:** It would have been approximately 10 years ago.

[00:20:41] **PENNE:** Yes, I think so.

[00:20:42] **HARVEY:** How come you decided to go from 13 to 63?

[00:20:47] **PENNE:** I was working for metro at the coke dock, or oar dock, and I was up on top of the crane one night and I grabbed a live wire [gesturing] and it scared me and it scared my husband. I had the seniority, I could go clerking and he [Penne's husband, John Lavery] really wanted me back on the ground. So I went clerking.

[00:21:18] **HARVEY:** Sure. Were you around at the time of the 2002 lock out?

[00:21:23] **PENNE:** Yes, I was.

[00:21:24] **HARVEY:** What did you do during that time?

[00:21:25] **PENNE:** I picketed where I had worked and that meant on metro coke dock. It was a good picket line—well, I have been on lots of picket lines before.

[00:21:37] **HARVEY:** Describe why you liked it.

[00:21:38] **PENNE:** I like it. I love the unity and the comradery and the feeling that you're making a difference [nods] . I do, I like that.

[00:21:50] **HARVEY:** Had you heard a lot about the lore of the ILWU?

[00:21:54] **PENNE:** No. I never heard of them except from my husband. [Shakes head] Didn't have a clue. Never heard the name Harry Bridges growing up.

[00:22:06] **HARVEY:** Where did you pick up the lore besides from your husband? Did you pick it up elsewhere?

[00:22:11] **PENNE:** An interesting thing is that one of my students, when I was teaching school, when she found out that I was going into work down on the waterfront, she said, "There's this guy, you need to know." And she told me to look up David Aryan. She and I, and Diane Middleton, and another old friend, we still get together, but Cathy [student] is mostly responsible for most of what I know about the ILWU.

[00:22:52] **HARVEY:** You retired something like six years ago?

[00:22:55] **PENNE:** Yes, I think I retired in 2007 at the beginning of the year.

[00:23:01] **HARVEY:** How old were you then?

[00:23:02] **PENNE:** I was 59 and a half, I took the early retirement.

[00:23:06] **HARVEY:** Why did you decide to retire early?

[00:23:08] **PENNE:** My husband had died, and they tell you not to do anything [drastic] for six months, so I didn't. But when I filed taxes right after he died, I discovered that his whole pension and social security were going to pay the taxes. I thought He gave his life, so that I could have this. It wasn't worth working. And my attitude changed after he died, I got really sick of dealing with superintendents and I started getting nasty and walking off the job if I didn't like them; [shrugs and laughs] it was time to go.

[00:23:53] **HARVEY:** Ok. You said you decided to come back to the pensioners to give something back. Can you talk a little bit more about your decision?

[00:24:03] **PENNE:** I owe the union; I owe them everything. If I can do a service for the union, I have to.

[00:24:17] **HARVEY:** Looking back at the whole thing, do you have a wind-up statement? Like "what it all meant to me" kind of broad, general statement?

[00:24:25] **PENNE:** Well, the same thing I just said. Myself and my children we owe everything to the union and I see relatives who don't have the union and are working for minimum wage and are not making it. There's only two of us in my extended family that had union jobs. We're both retired, we're both living well. I really wish that everyone could have this experience [nods] .

[00:25:01] **HARVEY:** Thank you very much.